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*Navigating Change: Planning for Societal and Spatial Transformations
Debates during the 12th AESOP Young Academics Conference*

Rozanne Charlotte Spijkerboer, Steven Ashley Forrest and Anne Marel Hilbers

Abstract: The 12th Young Academics Conference of the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP) was hosted at the University of Groningen from the 26th–29th March 2018. The conference theme was “Navigating Change: Planning for societal and spatial transformation”. We welcomed 53 participants from over 30 universities and organisations from across Europe and the USA. The aim of the conference was to understand how various disciplines within planning and related to planning are dealing with change. Researchers and practitioners presented their research on dealing with environmental, technological, population and political change, and approaches to study this. Understanding these processes and exploring appropriate planning approaches became apparent in framing as a bridging concept in the need for more explicit attention to the role of planners as actors in navigating change and the practice of respectful planning.

1 Introduction

The theme of the 2018 AESOP Young Academics¹ conference at the University of Groningen was “Navigating Change: Planning for societal and spatial transformation”. We live in an era of continuous changes that seem to be occurring more rapidly than before and are manifesting themselves spatially, socially and institutionally over time. These changes may be global (e.g. the rise of political populism) or more regionally-based (e.g. both rapid urban growth and rural decline) and can range from slow stresses (e.g. climate change) to sudden shocks (e.g. disasters). During the opening ceremony of the conference, the Oxford Dictionary’s (2018) definition of “navigation” was used as a starting point: “the process or activity of accurately ascertaining one’s position and planning and following a route”. In this report, we try to go beyond this rather abstract definition and understand what navigating change means for planning practitioners and researchers.

The outline of this report is as follows: we start by setting the scene to conceptualise societal and spatial change in Section 2. In Section 3, we discuss the debates that became apparent during the track sessions, keynotes (by Professors Maarten Hajer of the University of Utrecht, Philip McCann of the University of Sheffield, and Patrick Devine-Wright of the University of Exeter), day trip, workshops and expert panel discussion. This report concludes with recommendations for a future research agenda on navigating change for planners, policymakers and citizens in Section 4.

2 Setting the scene

Groningen and the surrounding area offer a wide variety of challenges dealing with the dynamics of spatial change and the impact on people and planning practices. These changes include a dichotomy between planning for both growth in the City of Groningen and decline in the rural areas of the Province of Groningen. Growth in the city has implications for mobility and public space. The Municipality of Groningen raised these issues in their workshop, focusing on bicycle parking problems and conflicts between cyclists and pedestrians. These changes are further complicated by earthquakes caused by gas extraction and flood risks. Workshop discussions with the Province of Groningen focused on balancing tensions between individual and collective interests concerning the impacts of these earthquakes in villages that are also dealing with rural decline. Rijkswaterstaat and the Wadden Academy showed a practical example of dealing with change in Dutch water management during an excursion to the Afsluitdijk, which is almost 100 years old and needs to be strengthened. Participants learned about combining issues of water safety with projects related to nature development (e.g. the fish migration river) and renewable energy (e.g. blue energy) at the Afsluitdijk.

“How can we ‘make sense’ of what is happening and plan for the future within a dynamic and increasingly complex society?” (Allmendinger 2017: 241)

This quote illustrates that on a fundamental level most planning researchers and practitioners are dealing with change and uncertainty. Whether focusing on issues related to changes in the environment, population, economy, society or politics, both planning practice and research appear to deal with two dimensions of change:

(1) the analytical dimension of change, which relates to “making sense” of the societal and spatial transformations that are observed and “ascertaining one’s position” regarding these changes. Various theories and perspectives are used by planning scholars to “make sense” of changes in society, including complexity theory (e.g. De Roo et al. 2012), institutional theories (e.g. Salet et al. 2018), socio-ecological resilience (e.g. Folke 2006) and multi-level perspectives (e.g. Geels 2018). During the conference, these changes and transformations in various domains were repeatedly characterised as “wicked problems” (Rittel, Webber 1973).

(2) the normative dimension of change, which focuses on how to act in light of the aforementioned changes and how to “plan for the future”. Various

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approaches and tools have been developed to deal with and navigate these changes, such as collaborative and participatory planning (e.g. Healey 1998), governance networks (e.g. Hajer, Versteeg 2003), adaptive planning (e.g. Rauws 2017), strategies and visions (e.g. Albrechts 2004), and environmental and social impact assessments (e.g. Slootweg et al. 2001).

According to De Roo et al. (2012), “it is the spatial planner’s job to create a bridge between ‘what is’ and ‘what could be’ (or in normative terms ‘what should be’)” (p.1). These theoretical discussions, along with the conference insights that will be discussed later in this report, show that it is crucial to take into account the widening role of planners, policymakers, and citizens in navigating these “wicked problems”. It is important to look at who is involved in navigating change, both in the process of “making sense” of the changes, as well as in determining potential responses to change and plan for the future.

3 Planning for societal and spatial transformations

Throughout the conference, three important themes relating to navigating change recurred across the different research topics: (i) framing change; (ii) a widening role of planners, policymakers and citizens relating to wicked problems; and (iii) considerations of power relations when navigating change.

Framing change

A central concept that seems to bridge both the analytical and normative dimension is the concept of “framing”. There was an acknowledgement that planners were influenced by their framing of certain issues, with Viktorija Prilenska’s research using serious gaming as a way of challenging existing perspectives held by developers on energy issues. Framing is not only relevant for current changes, but also future changes. In his keynote, Maarten Hajer argued for “framing of the future” with a greater emphasis on creativity and imagineering for planners. However, it was cautioned that planners must remember the history of places when looking to future options, which includes being “receptive to previous attempts by planners to create changes – and also their mistakes” (Jos Arts, expert panel discussion).

Research on impact assessments was presented, which relates to both making sense of the present and exploring future planning options (i.e. both analytical and normative dimensions). Patrick Patiwaël’s research into Heritage Impact Assessments, as part of heritage management, found that these assessments were focused on preventing change as opposed to navigating it. This highlighted the need for planners to both anticipate and adapt to changes. This point was followed up by the expert panel discussion, focusing on the need for planners

themselves to be flexible, especially in the context of uncertainty.

Widening role of planners, policymakers and citizens as regards wicked problems

In navigating change, the presenters showed the growing involvement of actors, especially citizens, within planning processes. Multiple presentations highlighted the need to have more inclusionary approaches with broader stakeholder engagement, with an aim of stimulating socially anticipated outcomes, social innovation, an empowered society and community resourcefulness. Several presenters indicated that this more inclusionary approach is reflected in ongoing institutional changes, with the state decentralising responsibilities and creating a more prominent role for citizens. This is being formalised in some instances, such as the new Environmental and Planning Act 2021 in the Netherlands. Presenters also showed state responsibilities being transferred to informal collaborations between market parties and citizens. Furthermore, Sara Ozogul’s research suggested market involvement as a means to help local citizen initiatives to “jump from the local scale” and thereby influence spatial governance systems beyond the micro-scale. Presenters also critically discussed the concept of decentralisation and whether transfers of responsibilities to citizens were also matched by a commensurate transfer of power and resources.

In light of this growing citizen role in planning, it is important to realise that not only planners frame changes. Kim von Schönfeld’s presentation argued that the individuals’ own experiences and personal backgrounds (i.e. social networks and previous experience of engagement) shape how they think about planning issues. Patrick Devine-Wright and expert panel members further encouraged planners to be aware of people’s emotions and to be “respectful” of their right to have emotions related to what we, as planners, are doing in their environment.

Considering power relations when navigating change

Multiple presentations analysed the dynamic interrelationships between proposed planning solutions and power relations, including issues of fairness and justice. An ongoing concern was that existing injustices were being reproduced in new approaches for navigating change. For example, Erik Meij’s research found that introducing “exemplary” newcomers in housing estates reinforces social differences and can result in the empowerment of stronger social groups.

Discussions also focused on changes with clear “winners” and “losers”, as seen in gas extraction in Groningen (i.e. those benefiting from gas revenue and those experiencing earthquake damage) and as a result of globalisation. Philip McCann posed the question in reference to the Brexit referendum decision and his research on the geographies

of discontent: “how can you make policies in a way that makes people feel like they have a stake, that make them feel empowered again?”. Discussions concerning this question highlighted the necessity for experts, such as planners, to regain the trust that a part of society appears to have lost. Without such trust, it might be difficult to bridge the gap between perceptions of “what is” and “what should be”.

4 Conclusion

The starting point of the conference was to gain insight into the two dimensions of change in the context of spatial planning. This focused our attention on making sense of “what is” and “what could be” or “should be”. The conference furthered the statement made by De Roo et al. (2012) that it is necessary to bridge the divide between these dimensions. However, discussions from our conference show that it is not only the planner’s responsibility, but a result of the interaction between planners, civil society and market actors.

Framing appears to be a “bridging concept” that can help reflection upon societal and spatial transformations in various contexts. It can shed light on how changes are framed differently by various actors and how this relates to impacts of proposed interventions.

An important insight seems to be that one should not only look at the role of planning and plans in navigating change, but also explicitly at the role of the planner. Planners themselves need to show flexibility in their framing of planning issues and solutions in order to navigate change, and remain respectful of the perspectives and emotions of various actors involved in the process. This appears to be an important dimension in experts, such as planners, regaining the trust of society. In doing so, it is necessary to further explore who is losing trust and what they are specifically losing trust in in order to provide opportunities for planners to address this.

Insights from this conference can be used to propose recommendations for further research and for the development of future research agendas. The importance of framing for both planners and those affected by proposed interventions should be central to this. Future research should more explicitly consider whether new planning approaches for navigating change are not replicating and reinforcing existing power differences. This is especially important when balancing collective and individual interests within and between regions. In order to overcome these power differences, more explicit attention to the role of planners themselves – as actors in navigating change and the practice of respectful planning – is needed. This includes, for example, a discussion on the use of terms such as “winners” and “losers”: we encourage planners to explore the consequences of framing certain groups or regions in these terms and discuss potential alternatives.

To conclude, planners, civil society and market actors should jointly frame “what is” and “what should be” in navigating change and do so in a manner that shows mutual respect and helps to regain trust.

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Notes

- 1 The Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP) has over 150 member schools. Since 2003, the Young Academics Network is a loosely structured branch of AESOP. It provides a platform through which young academics in planning and related disciplines can share their ideas in an open and inclusive environment, challenging and supporting one another with support of the senior AESOP members. Besides publications, the network meets annually for a separate free-of-charge four-day conference organised by one of its members. The themes of AESOP Young Academics conferences are linked to the host cities’ and universities’ local challenges, programmes and strengths.

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